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From Object to Subject: Feminist Consciousness in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract

This research article critically examines Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 2008 novel, The Palace of Illusions, through a feminist lens where a woman's perspective reshapes the ancient tale of the Mahabharata. Not often seen this way before, the tale shifts its focus toward Draupadi – not as a background presence but as someone who thinks, speaks, and feels. Instead of silence, she now holds voice; rather than passivity, there is intent. Her story unfolds in her own words, giving depth that was absent from earlier versions shaped by male views. One after another, moments arise in which defiance takes shape: how she describes coming into being, what happens during her wedding, and the feelings stirred by Karna despite the limits placed on women's longing. The article argues that the novel The Palace of Illusions consolidates a broader tendency toward mythological revisionism as a feminist practice, where the retelling of epic history aims largely to give women a voice of their own.

Keywords: Mythological revisionism, female agency, patriarchy, female subjectivity.

Introduction

The *Mahabharata*, one of the oldest and longest epics written in Sanskrit, influences ideas throughout South Asia, not only because of its length but also because of its timeless presence. It evolved over the centuries, acquiring multiple

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layers of meaning, and was transmitted orally before being articulated and then inscribed, originating in the seventh century BCE and extending into late antiquity. The story of the epic places the utmost emphasis on men who govern, fight, or instruct across the centuries. But the women, like Gandhari, Kunti, and Draupadi, function more as a catalyst for others' decisions than as an autonomous individual. "The 12 women characters played a significant and vital role in many situations and influenced the process and the outcome of the events in the Mahabharata. The holistic leadership roles played by these women characters have a great significance to leadership theory and practice in today's world" (Bhadeshiya et al. 37). They have hardly been given a voice, or we can say that they are completely silenced under the shade of patriarchy. Their motivations remain hidden beneath interpretations of dharma shaped by ecclesiastical authority and royal interests. Draupadi, the furious and arrogant heroine of the epic Mahabharata, has remained a mysterious and significant figure. Known for both her beauty and her steadfast determination, Draupadi was the wife and queen of the five illustrious Pandavas and the daughter of Drupad, the king of Panchala. Her voice resounds against injustice, confronts silence, and rejects obliteration. However, she has yet to articulate what resides within her. The pages now bear the imprints of those long departed who shaped her thoughts without her consent.

Near the turn of the century, feminist reimaginings of myth began to surface. Across continents, authors like Margaret Atwood in *The Penelopiad* and Madeline Miller in *Circe* shifted narratives, centring female speech where it had been absent. From India emerged Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), standing firmly within this movement. Known for its lyrical prose and for bridging cultures, Divakaruni – an Indian-American writer – took up the ancient epic, the *Mahabharata*. "Devi's "Draupadi" therefore offers both a critique of the long dur & eacute;e of postcolonial militarism by exposing the routinization, through bureaucratization, of dispossessive violence meted out by the state onto Indigenous peoples and lands as well as a resistant poetics of Indigenous survival in the shadow of the military occupation" (Jhingran 1). Her version unfolds through Draupadi, called Panchaali, speaking in the first person at last. The novel goes beyond mere retelling or condensation; it is a deliberate reshaping with clear intent. Through crafted design, it gives Draupadi a childhood, a secret love for the mysterious Karna, a sarcastic inner monologue, and, most importantly, a constant awareness that challenges, reflects, and reinterprets the patriarchal logic of the epic.

This research article critically examines Divakaruni's re-visioning of Draupadi's image. She is not the discarded one in the dice game, the prize after the war, or the one to blame for the revenge that follows. Some readings of the *Mahabharata* are sympathetic, but still, she is a broken queen, a powerful and emotional woman, and the accidental reason things fall apart. These readings also limit her to the men's story, but she is still recognised. Instead, Divakaruni wants to know what it is like to be Draupadi by letting her tell her own story from the inside. The point is not her role in the story but the act of Draupadi speaking for herself.

Critics continue to discuss the novel *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, with a variety of views and prominent issues. According to S. Mangayorkarasi, Divakaruni's work "breaks the silence of the men who originally penned the Sanskrit story" (26). On the other hand, Poongodi A. opposes tradition; he believes the story is a modification of traditional conceptions of obligation. Ethics arise from experience and feeling, not from laws (115). More recent postcolonial critiques argue that distance from India enables a clearer perspective, less bound by habitual religious assumptions. However, most current academic work either broadly praises the novel for being a woman's version of the story or looks very closely at only one part of it, like the dice. There isn't yet a compelling explanation of how Divakaruni makes us aware of feminist issues. Specifically, how her techniques of writing – the way she plays with time, how elements from other parts of the story are referenced, how symbols recur, and how the way the story is told shapes what we experience – turn an ancient character into someone with a rich inner life.

This study examines *The Palace of Illusions* through the lens of feminist narratology and existentialist feminism. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949), said women are made into "others," and that they've always been considered the opposite of men, unimportant, and the thing against which men define themselves as the main, important 'subject'. The novel doesn't follow the usual ways of doing things but uses the 'I' of the narrator, what Draupadi thinks to herself, and deliberate omissions or shifts in important scenes to create what Susan Lanser calls "the narratological construction of female authority" (226). The analysis focuses on three pivotal moments that reveal this shift: first, how Draupadi tells the story of her birth and marriage, reclaiming narratives that men have told for a long time; then, her being open about her desires and, in particular, her feelings for Karna, which goes against the accepted moral code of the epic; and finally, how she deals with the pain and the attacks on her, gradually moving from silently being hurt to protesting out loud to a more sarcastic acceptance.

What stands at the heart of this study is a shift in portrayal: how Divakaruni reshapes Draupadi, moving her beyond mere exchange in the game of dice, post-battle claim, or blame for vengeance. Some readings of the *Mahabharata* do show sympathy but nevertheless focus on her as injured royalty, as raw feminine power, and as an unintentional spark to the downfall. Recognition comes, but so does reduction, as these viewpoints entangle her in stories based on the decisions of men. On the other hand, Divakaruni seeks understanding through the inner voice. An account of legendary function has little interest; the interest lies in what appears when Draupadi speaks for herself.

Scholarship on *The Palace of Illusions* still attracts scholarly interest, yet there are gaps. The critical attention comes from voices like S. Mangayorkarasi (2016), who sees Divakaruni's work as shattering the silence that male-dominated narratives have imposed on the original Sanskrit tale. Rather than simply challenging tradition. According to A. Poongodi (2018), the narrative is framed as a reworking of old notions of duty, morality is not found in regulations, but in

emotions, in what is suffered (115). From another angle, recent research has been using postcolonial lenses to study the distance from India, which gives a clearer viewpoint less bound by traditional religious interpretations. Much of the existing scholarship either commends the novel broadly for centering a female narrator or focuses on particular moments, such as the dice roll. What is missing is a detailed analysis of the narrative techniques, temporal shifts, intertextual echoes, recurring symbols, and perspectival choices, that render this ancient figure profoundly complex and feminist in her awareness. This study addresses that gap by analysing *The Palace of Illusions* through the lens of feminist narratology and existentialist feminist thought. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) proposes that women are constructed as "others." She also says that women have always been the negative, the inconsequential, and the object against which males establish themselves as the absolute Subject. The work does not follow typical lines but uses first-person voice, inner speech, and intentional gaps or alterations in critical scenes to form what academic Susan Lanser calls "the narratological construction of female authority" (226). The focus turns to three pivotal moments revealing this shift: first, how Draupadi tells her own coming into being and union, taking back stories long held by male retellings; next, her open claim of longing, especially toward Karna, disrupting established ethical codes within the epic framework; finally, her evolving response to pain and assault, shifting slowly from quiet suffering through spoken protest toward wry distance. "Draupadi is under emotional and psychological pressure to publicly prove her virtuous self and this finds expression in emotionally-charged situations apparently as masculine traits" (Hazri 79).

This study draws on critical insights from feminist thought, such as those of Beauvoir, Lanser, and Toril Moi, alongside those from narrative structure studies, notably Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal, and layers them with perspectives from cross-cultural myth exploration by Wendy Doniger and Devdutt Pattanaik. The study examines the far-reaching effects of reshaping myths through feminist storytelling in Indian writing and beyond. It argues that *The Palace of Illusions* does more than restate an old tale; instead, it functions as a quiet demonstration of narrative's role in shaping feminist awareness – slowly shifting a once-silent figure into one who speaks with increasing clarity.

Narrative Voice and Authority

The Mahabharata is available in numerous forms, each of which emphasises a distinct set of problems. The narrative perspective and the account of each rendition together dictate the work's overarching style. Following independence, the ancillary narratives of the Mahabharata gained prominence, and the epic itself became more popular. Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (1995), Devadutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010), Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* (2013), Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen* (2013), and Sharath Komarraju's *The Rise of Hastinapura* (2015) are some of the well-known retellings of the illustrious Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. The novel *The Palace of Illusions* by

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is another significant creative reworking of the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective. It tells Draupadi's story in the first person, from her fiery origins to her tragic demise. One of Divakaruni's powerful female figures is Draupadi, whose feminism reaches its height in *The Palace of Illusions.* In the novel, Divakaruni invites readers into Draupadi's world by saying, "It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into." (*The Palace of Illusions*, Author's Note xv).

Divakaruni's choice of first-person retrospective narration fundamentally alters the power dynamics of the Mahabharata. In the Sanskrit epic, Draupadi is always spoken about by others. She rarely speaks for herself, and when she does, her words are filtered through Vyasa's male authorial voice, a text composed and transmitted by generations of male Brahmins. As feminist scholar S. Mangayarkarasi observes, "the original epic relegates Draupadi to the margins, her voice either absent or mediated by patriarchal narrators" (36). Divakaruni reverses this dynamic entirely. From the opening line, "My mother-in-law, the widowed queen Gandhari, never liked me" (3). Draupadi seizes control of her story. This is not merely a stylistic choice; it is an epistemological one. By granting Draupadi the first-person "I", Divakaruni refuses the epic's objectifying gaze and insists on her protagonist's status as a thinking, feeling, and *telling* subject.

The declaration of Draupadi's affection for Karna in Divakaruni's rendition is one of the most striking contrasts with Vyasa's version. Draupadi challenges the injustices inflicted upon her rather than suffering in silence, as a typical woman would. Divakaruni converts Panchaali from an object to a subject. This immediately establishes a connection between readers and a contemporary understanding of feminine identity, as well as a mythological one. Draupadi is depicted as a sceptic of ancient mythologies and rituals in The Palace of Illusions, even as the entire production features heavenly figures and manifestations of gods and goddesses. In Divakaruni, Draupadi is more pragmatic, rebellious, and stronger. She rejects the dreadful destiny of being married to five men, as the powerful foreseer Vyasa foretold. The eternal bitterness in Draupadi's psyche at her father's initial refusal is evident when she is born from the fire her father, Drupad, built and sang for the sake of his son, Dhristadyumna – "In his own harsh and obsessive way, he was generous, maybe even indulgent. But I couldn't forgive him for that initial rejection. Perhaps that was why, as I grew from a girl to a young woman, I didn't trust him completely" (Divakaruni 6).

Desire and the Female Body

Draupadi did not allow herself to be either tyrannical or feeble, as she maintained her position in a strongly patriarchal culture. Her realisation that her father's initial rejection was based on the belief that a female child was unworthy of aiding in the acquisition of allies greatly disturbed her, causing her to gradually transform into the person she is today. Dhai Ma's narrative of her origin captivates her. Before she was conceived, the gods foretold her destiny, informing her that she

would be born to change the course of history. This narrative satisfies her femininity, and as a result, she is perpetually striving to connect her experiences to the prophecy's fulfilment. "Draupadi is daughter of King Drupada in the epic of Mahabharata. For many years Drupada, the king of Panchala had no children. So, to have children he performed tapas (austerities). He thought only of God Day and night and prayed to him"(Motswapong 477).

Divakaruni's book elevates Draupadi's adversity to represent the global struggles of all women, in contrast to other interpretations of the Mahabharata that blame her for the catastrophic Kurukshetra war.

Divakaruni emphasizes Draupadi's feminine love and sentiment for Karna, despite the narrative foretelling her marriage to the five Pandavas against her will. Nevertheless, Krishna persisted in influencing and occupying Draupadi's mind with images of Arjun, as if he were the only individual capable of surmounting the Swayamvar challenge and assisting her in realising her childhood aspiration to change the course of history. Nevertheless, upon viewing Karna's image, Draupadi is overcome with emotion and refers to him as:

> . . . the figure caught my eyes on Duryodhan's right, older than the prince and austere-faced, the man sat upright, his lean body wary, as though he knew the world to be dangerous. Though during court, he seemed utterly alone. His only ornaments were a pair of gold earrings and a curiously patterned gold armor; unlike anything I'd seen. His eyes were filled with an ancient sadness. They pulled me into them. My impatience evaporated. I no longer cared to see Arjun's portrait. Instead, I wanted to know how those eyes would look if the man smiled. Absurdly, I wanted to be the reason for his smile. (Divakaruni 69)

In India, women were historically prohibited from choosing their life partners. Society favours males by designating virginity as the sole sacred possession of women, whereas men are not subjected to this need. Consequently, spousal infidelity has emerged as a persistent problem in many households. Dhai Ma counselled Draupadi that, although she was of royal lineage, she should acknowledge the likelihood that her husband, a prince of any realm, would be obligated to wed other women. Draupadi, a feminist icon, longs for her husband's unwavering loyalty and singular affection, as demonstrated by Karna's gaze. Ancient tradition depicts a lady, whose body is consumed by a solitary male, as an exemplar of virtue. Draupadi is obligated to select among five husbands due to the esteemed masculinist "*dharma*". Vyasa bestows upon her the distinctive privilege of eternally maintaining her virginity as she moves from one sibling to another. The advantage is solely beneficial to her partners; it does not aid her, as no parent in her immediate surroundings has corroborated her memory – "Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands' benefit than mine" (ibid. 120).

In the original *Mahabharata*, Draupadi, revered as the goddess of virginity and

whose purity is irrationally challenged in the court of advisors through disrobing, is bestowed with divinity to uphold the decree for women. The poetry foreshadows the historical transformations Draupadi would initiate upon her birth. However, it remains unclear how Draupadi plans to impact history until she experiences irrevocable humiliation in the presence of esteemed characters like Beeshma, Dhrona, and, notably, Karna. Is this humiliation the sole method by which Draupadi can influence the trajectory of human history? This is the point at which the feminist debate becomes compelling:

> In the interest of the effectiveness of the women's movement, emphasis is often placed upon a reversal of the public-private hierarchy. This is because, in ordinary sexist households, educational institutions, or workplaces, the sustaining explanation remains that the public sector is more important, rational, mysterious, and, generally, more masculine than the private. The feminist, reversing this hierarchy, must insist that sexuality and emotions are, in fact, so much more important and threatening that a masculinist sexual politics is obliged, repressively, to sustain all public activity. The most "material" sedimentation of this repressive politics is the institutionalised sex discrimination that seems the hardest stone to push. (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 89)

The portrayal of women in this notable epic shows that they face greater discrimination in public than in private spheres. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni emphasizes Draupadi's fervor, which the original story overlooks. Draupadi's principal ambition has been to govern the most magnificent castle in the world since childhood, as foretold by Vyasa.

Draupadi's ambitions to have a grand palace and to be a queen among kings are in fact intensified when she recognises that Drupad's rejection of her stems solely from her being female. She struggles to maintain her dignity as a woman both as the wife of the five greatest warriors and as the daughter of the renowned king Drupada. This is a challenge woman have always faced; a system of male dominance has consistently denied them equal consideration. This unequal treatment lies at the root of the struggles women face in society and at home, as well as their desire for power and recognition. Though she grows stronger and more powerful, Draupadi does not choose Karna as her husband at the *Swayamvar* (the choosing of a husband) to save her brother Dhri. She didn't want to be responsible for her brother's, father's and children's being killed, and she was worried about that when Dhri tried to attack Karna at the *Swayamvar*. Even though she did have feelings for Karna, Draupadi gave him up to protect Dhri, who, since her whole paternal family had left her, had always been her only friend and supporter from the very beginning. It discloses her femininity. To convince Karna to withdraw from the challenge and cease the conflict that could jeopardise Dhri's life, Draupadi poses him with the most venomous inquiry, which she laments in silence until her death: "Before you try to win my hand, King of Anga, tell me your father's name. Clearly, a bride-to-be, who must divorce her family and marry into her husband's line, has the

right to know the truth" (Divakaruni 95).

Violence, Humiliation, and Resistance

The experience of violence and, more significantly, the reaction to it serves as the crucible for the formation of feminist consciousness. The dice game in the Mahabharata offers the starkest example of the epic's treatment of women. Draupadi's husband, Yudhishthira, lost her in a bet; she was dragged into the court by her hair, her clothes torn, and she was stripped before an assembly of kings, elders, and warriors. Traditionally, this moment has been read as the nadir of Draupadi's helplessness the transformation of a queen into a spectacle of voyeuristic desire. This scene takes on a new significance in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions.* The dice game and its aftermath are the beginning of Draupadi's political and psychological awakening. She is not portrayed as a passive victim. Divakaruni defines resistance not as a single brave act, but as an ongoing and developing practice of survival through tactical compression of the narrative, through mobilisation of rage as an ethical stance, and through transformation of humiliation into an act of defiance. Most striking in Divakaruni's version of the dice game is silence. As mentioned earlier, the book narrows the disrobing moment to mere lines. Pain beyond speech shapes her choice – Draupadi refuses to retell, as she said, "I won't tell you what happened next. Some things are too painful for words" (Divakaruni 189). What remains unspoken is significant. Briefness becomes its statement. The scene shrinks, yet lingers. Absence conveys a message that detail cannot match. Refusal to narrate here acts deliberately – feminist intent shapes silence. Meanwhile, slowly unfolding, the Sanskrit work lingers on display. Vyasa describes precisely how Dushasana seizes Draupadi's hair: "She whose hair had always been perfumed and braided with flowers was now dragged by her hair" (*Mahabharata* 2.60.22). Then comes the tugging at her sari, an act observed without speech, sometimes met instead with mocking sounds. In Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's view, such depictions transform pain into an object – a woman's body turned into script, examined, decoded, and absorbed through masculine eyes (*Real and Imagined Women* 89).

Divakaruni declines to engage in this commodification. By not providing the reader with the visual details the epic offers, she takes away the role of the voyeur. We can't see Draupadi's humiliation happen; we can only see how she feels about it. Draupadi says, "I closed my eyes. I did not want to see their faces - the kings, the elders, my husbands. I did not want to count the ones who looked away" (Divakaruni 190). The scene shifts from an outdoor show to an indoor testimony. According to A. Poongodi, "by centring Draupadi's consciousness rather than her body, Divakaruni reclaims the narrative from the male gaze and returns it to the female subject" (117). We don't see Draupadi's body; we only see her closed eyes, which show that she doesn't want to see herself as an object. According to narratologist Gérard Genette, this internal focalisation limits us to what the character sees and feels, which makes the reader sympathise completely aligned with her point of view (*Narrative*

Discourse: An Essay in Method 189). We are not allowed to be comfortable like a courtroom spectator; instead, we are forced to feel Draupadi's trauma up close and personal.

Draupadi's life was full of emotional highs and lows that most women don't go through. In The Palace of Illusions, Draupadi's hidden love reveals her self-desire, even as people praise her for her strength and confidence despite the terrible odds she faces. The author honours women by showing Draupadi's passion and stating that they should not be submissive to men or give up their interests for the sake of the community. Draupadi willingly accepts the consequences of her illicit love for Karna: she falls first from the mountain on the way to paradise. To put it simply, "Divakaruni shows her special concern for the female characters in *The Palace of Illusions*, who were tortured and ignored in the Mahabharata. The feminist consciousness serves as the voice of humanity as a whole" (Agarwal 67).

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* transforms Draupadi from a silent epic object into a female subject who can speak. The novel grants Draupadi narrative authority by telling the story from her perspective. By voicing forbidden desire, it reclaims female sexuality as a domain of subjectivity. It transforms shame into resistance by redefining violence. Divakaruni does not construct a perfect feminist protagonist. Her Draupadi is vain, jealous, and morally ambiguous. This complexity is the novel's most radical aspect. Beauvoir argues that women have traditionally been characterized as "others." Divakaruni does not replace the patriarchal archetype with a feminist counterpart. She gives Draupadi the freedom simply to be. She is inconsistent, desires the wrong things, and acknowledges her failures. The last line of the book says, "You have heard only one version. And that version is mine" (Divakaruni 360), it is not a claim to absolute truth but a demand to be hear.

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